MEDIA STATEMENT FOR RELEASE WITHOUT EMBARGO

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**BREAKTHROUGH YEAR OF EMPOWERING THE NEXT GENERATION OF STEM PROFESSIONALS IN THE NORTHERN CAPE**

**Upington, 12 February 2025 - The Academy for Environmental Leadership South Africa (AEL) is proud to announce a breakthrough year in 2025 for its Access for Success programme, a vital initiative started in 2022 to address educational inequity and foster the development of skilled professionals in critical STEM fields. The AEL, a registered and accredited higher education institution strategically located in the Northern Cape, facilitates this programme.**

"The educational system in South Africa has experienced many challenges, especially in critical subjects such as Mathematics and Physical Sciences," states Heidi Bartis, CEO at AEL.

According to the 2024 National Senior Certificate Examination Report, performance in mathematics and physical science has improved over the past three years, except for a slight drop in performance in physical science in 2024. However, the report further states, "While it is encouraging that the Government's development and education targets have been partially met, it is clear that high-level achievement in mathematics and physical sciences continues to be a serious challenge in the schooling system. Specifically, higher numbers of learners achieving, for instance, 60% in the two subjects is needed to address skills shortfalls in the labour market, which slow down the prospects for higher economic growth."

"The low pass rates in these subjects hinder many learners from qualifying for university STEM-related courses. It demonstrates the need and the importance for improved Grade 12 Mathematics and Physical Science, and the development of a pipeline for STEM-related professions".Learners who do not obtain at least 60% in maths and physical science may struggle to be admitted to university degree courses in STEM disciplines, and the DBE set a target of 35,000 learners scoring at least 60% in maths and physical science in 2024.

**A leader in Grade-12 Mathematics and Physical Science Education**

The Access for Success programme - facilitated by the AEL - addresses systemic inequities in South African education by offering a comprehensive year-long intervention. Hosted on the AEL's campus, this initiative focuses on improving National Senior Certificate (NSC) results in Mathematics and Physical Sciences - critical subjects for tertiary STEM education. Learners often come from under-resourced schools with limited access to qualified teachers, learning materials, and essential infrastructure. The Access for Success (A4S) programme levels the playing field by providing these learners with structured support towards a brighter future. The average scores for the A4S 2024 cohort were over 60%, with 64.7% in Mathematics and 63.6% in Physical Science. What makes these results even more impressive is that while an average of 7.9% of the cohort entered the program with 60% or higher scores, a remarkable average of 69% achieved marks in the NSC Examination above 60% in both subjects.

**Key programme elements include:**

* 12-14 hours of intensive weekly tuition in Mathematics and Physical Sciences.
* Leadership and life skills workshops to enhance self-confidence, resilience, and communication.
* Mentorship and career guidance, including assistance with university and bursary applications.
* Accommodation and entire board at the Duin-in-die-Weg Campus.

In 2025, the A4S plans to increase enrolment to 90 students, up from 50 in 2022. Partnerships with universities and institutions of higher learning, corporations, and local leaders are being strengthened to ensure long-term sustainability and scalability.

"This year marks a turning point for the A4S programme," says Bartis. "We have already seen impressive results. Learners are improving their Mathematics and Physical Science marks greatly and becoming more equipped, confident and decisive leaders. The A4S produces sought-after candidates for nearby institutions such as Sol Plaatje University and Cape Peninsula University of Technology, amongst others."

The programme has demonstrated its efficacy through improved academic performance and university admissions:

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| Cohort | Mathematics | Physical Sciences | University Admission |
| 2022  | 12.1% improvement | 12.2% improvement | 81.6% rate |
| 2023  | 18.2% improvement | 12.6% improvement | 98% rate |
| 2024  | 17.4% improvement | 14.7% improvement | 100% |

Beyond academics, participants develop critical life skills, leadership abilities, and a strong sense of purpose. Graduates have excelled in careers across conservation ecology, eco-tourism, and renewable energy, contributing to the Northern Cape's growth.

**Support and Sustainability**

The strength of the A4S programme is that learners are removed from an environment with psycho-social issues and placed within an ideal environment where they are safe, can flourish, have access to a competent and committed academic team and are supported by all staff. Our location and setting are also unique.

Recognising the broader challenges learners from disadvantaged communities face, Access for Success incorporates psycho-social support to address mental health, resilience, and well-being, including:

* Regular counselling sessions and peer support groups.
* Workshops on emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and effective time management.

The all-inclusive cost per learner covers everything from tuition and meals to transportation and life skills workshops. Bursaries are designed to cover academic fees, accommodation, meals, and extracurricular activities, ensuring learners can focus entirely on their studies. Funding comes from diverse sources, including mining companies, trusts, and government initiatives.

The AEL employs a rigorous Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) framework to ensure programme effectiveness and donor accountability. The MEL framework ensures impact and allows the AEL to improve its programme for more notable continuous success.

**Economic Development for the Province**

Mathematics and Physical Science are critical subjects for the province and the nation. The Northern Cape has many opportunities, particularly mining, renewable energy, and agriculture. The Access for Success programme ensures that local talent is developed to meet these industries' needs. More information on the A4S programme is available via this link: [www.access4success.co.za](http://www.access4success.co.za).

The Academy for Environmental Leadership was founded in 2015 in response to the growing need for environmental leadership. AEL's [Higher Certificate in Conservation Ecology](https://afel.co.za/our-programme/) (an NQF Level 5 accredited programme) is a future-focused, accredited programme delivered on the banks of the Orange River in the Northern Cape. Conservation Ecology is a multi-disciplinary and integrated field related to protecting and maintaining the environment and dealing with habitat threats. It also focuses on the sustainable utilisation of land, water, and other natural resources. During the academic year, our students gain knowledge of specifically focused concepts of biology, ecology, soil science, geography, chemistry, physics, social sciences, and environmental legislation.

"Our goal is to prepare learners to thrive academically and return to their communities as skilled professionals driving sustainable development. By addressing local economic demands, the programme aligns education with industry needs, creating a pipeline of skilled professionals to fuel the province's growth," Bartis concludes.

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**ABOUT THE ACADEMY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP SOUTH AFRICA (AEL)**:

At the AEL, we offer parents great comfort and peace of mind, knowing their child receives the necessary guidance to achieve optimal growth and personal development.

The year-long NQF-level 5 National Higher Certificate in Conservation Ecology programme is structured as a transformative academic year in nature. It comprises ten modules spanning various key disciplines concerning Conservation Ecology, including Personal Development and Conflict Management. The educational modules are complemented by practical training, some done outdoors in the veld and others done in our Campus Laboratory. Our programme offers outdoor activities and practical modules, including Orange River rowing, Fieldcraft & Tracking, and First Aid training. AEL students will also embark on an action-packed educational tour of the Richtersveld during the year. At the end of the year, successful students obtain an NQF-level 5 National Higher Certificate in Conservation Ecology.

The AEL's unique combination of academic rigour and vocationally orientated learning sets its students on a path to success. With a successful pass rate of over 95% and in 2024 100%, the AEL's track record speaks for itself. AEL students also boast a higher first-year success rate when they enter university, outperforming peers at traditional institutions, where many students struggle to adjust. While starting university immediately after matric may work for some, taking an intentional step towards personal and academic growth can offer long-term benefits. The AEL's higher education certificate serves as both a valuable qualification and an opportunity for students to develop into well-rounded individuals with a clear sense of direction for their future.

**CONTACTS FOR MEDIA ENQUIRIES**

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